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Origins of People's Library Movement in Kerala

The paper traces out the history of a highly specialised and efficient service with recorded information, organised and managed by the people, that existed in ancient Kerala. The paper also explains how the influence of this tradition and the requirements of the educational, social and political reform movements of the later half of the Nineteenth Century caused the establishment of thousands of small libraries in villages that gave birth to a unique people's library movement in Kerala.

The concept of public library is related more to the principle of free access than to anything else. The principle that libraries are for all prevailed right down the ages. In ancient days educational and cultural activities were mostly connected with religion. Theology laid down the law and rules of conduct. Among them was the belief that free gift of knowledge and its carrier-books would earn merit for the giver in this life and the life after. According to Manu free book service would earn more merit than the gift of the whole earth.¹ This belief encouraged the rulers, scholars and philanthropists of the ancient times to record knowledge, preserve such records and render service to the needy.

1. Scholar Homes of the People

Library systems or the services with recorded knowledge in ancient times in India, wherever present, coexisted with educational activities. In those days, as in other parts of India, education was imparted in Kerala through the *Gurukula* system of education. Scholars adapted their family environment in such a way that it would blend with the teaching learning process that was to be

carried out there. This resulted in hereditary specialization by families in specific subject fields of ayurveda, astrology, architecture, martial arts etc.² Such families maintained great wealth of documents on their topics of interest for the use of teachers, students and all who would seek that knowledge. These collections were highly specialized, though unlinked and far-fetched.

Specialization gave teeth to this system. The moorings with educational system and professional fields made these collections very productive and also commanded their full utility. These sparse collections, automatically formed a network of document collections which in their totality was a system covering all subjects. The religious belief in the greatness of free book service made the collections open to all who actually sought the information stored in these collections. Thus it can be said that scholar homes were the first libraries in Kerala, maintained by the people and for the people.

2. The State Intervention

Gradually temples and government entered the field of education and naturally document collections, in large scale often, formed part of these educational institutions which were known as 'salais'. The subject collections at Kandaloor Salai, Kottarakkara Salai and others were vast and varied. They collected, copied and organised documents on all branches of knowledge.

In those days librarianship was considered as an esteemed profession. Only great scholars could aspire for librarianship and were loved and held in reverence by all, teachers and students alike. The prime of place that was granted to library services in ancient days contributed to the academic excellence of those times.³

Later developments like the hundred year war, the Aryan immigration and the resultant changes in social system, and the intervention of the West led to serious socio-economic disruption of life in Kerala. The educational and library systems were adversely affected. Most of the collections of recorded knowledge built up by devotion and dedication through centuries were destroyed. The interests of rulers and people were diverted from educational and cultural spheres of life. More and more people plunged into illiteracy.

In the beginning of Nineteenth Century it was the alarming increase of illiteracy that led to the intervention of the State in the sphere of education. Government established libraries as part

of its programme for expansion of educational facilities in the State. In 1829 Maharaja Swathy Tirunal established the Trivandrum Public Library.⁴ Consequently many other libraries were started in different parts of the State. In 1918 elaborate rules and guidelines on maintenance of libraries, allotment of grant etc. were framed by the Government.⁵

3. Movement of the People

Kerala's library history points to consistent and lively involvement of the people in library affairs. In fact, Kerala is known not for the library activities alone but for a century old library movement. It was a spontaneous movement in its nature and growth. It reinforced the library development projects of the State.

Various social and political forces directly or indirectly contributed to the birth and growth of people's library movement in Kerala. The second half of the Nineteenth Century witnessed the explosion of national political consciousness and the growth of an organized national movement in India.⁶ This resulted in recognizing the increased importance of the individual. Creating public opinion and spreading political ideas presupposed an educated and informed public. Political workers, therefore, gave more emphasis to social education activities which necessitated establishment of public libraries in all rural areas. The people's library movement got special impetus, also from the emergence of political parties, social reform movements, communal and religious organizations and the struggle for responsible government in the State.⁷

4. Socio-Political Reformation

The spread of Western education influenced movements for social and political reform in Kerala during the last decade of Nineteenth Century. Rulers of Kerala were benevolent and modern in outlook. So most of the people's movements were bloodless revolutions that naturally culminated in victory. The first legislature in any Indian state was formed by the Maharaja of Travancore in 1888.⁸ Three years later representatives of the growing middle class presented to the King a memorial, known as Malayale Memorial, signed by more than 10,000 persons. It appealed to the king to allot a share to the people in the administration of the State which was then largely done by persons imported from Madras. This agitation continued for a decade. It awakened the middle class of Travancore thereby paving the way for a new chapter in the political history of the State.⁹

In all the communities in Kerala, from the highest to the lowest in social strata obsolete customs and practices were alive during the Nineteenth Century. The Western educated and progressive minded younger generation started reform activities during this period and resisted outdated customs and traditions.

5. National Movement

Freedom movement also contributed to library movement in Kerala. The large public meeting held by Indian National Congress at Calicut in 1903 under the Chairmanship of a veteran Congress leader C. Vijaya Raghavacharyar was a milestone in the history of freedom movement in Kerala.¹⁰ In 1910 a branch of the famous Home Rule League of Mrs. Annie Besant was formed in Malabar.¹¹ Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 and 1932-33 and regional social movements like Guruvayoor Temple Satyagraha for permitting the lower caste to enter the temple stirred the Kerala society. Peasants, workers, teachers and many other groups were drawn into politics.¹² In the forties, besides Quit India Movement, the agitation for self-government in Travancore and Cochin states gathered momentum. In Travancore, the Travancore State Congress and in Cochin, the Cochin Prajamandalam led the movement. The common culture, language, literature and the parallel social and political reform movements going on in the states of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar gave birth to the idea of a united Kerala by the dissolution of the political boundaries which kept them as different political entities.¹³

The upsurge of newspapers, the principal means of communication, contributed immensely to the national movement. Malayala Manorama, the largest circulated daily, came into existence in 1890. Kerala Kaumudhi was started in 1911. Mathrubhoomi, the paper in which many who actively participated in the freedom struggle were associated, started its publication in 1923. Numerous dailies and periodicals were started by different political, religious and communal organizations to support their activities. Newspapers carried details of the political and social reform activities that were going on around. It was the only medium of communication available in those days and people anxiously waited for every issue. In 1910 when Swadeshabhimani K. Ramakrishna Pillai, the pioneer of fearless journalism who was waging a crusade against the administration of the then Dewan, was arrested and deported it had its repercussions all over Kerala.¹⁴

6. Seeds of the Movement

It was the frogleeping of newspaper publication and thereby the immense demand for the daily news that prompted the speedy establishment of thousands of village libraries in a very short period. There are also instances where rich households who could afford a daily newspaper would ultimately become the venue for a public library. Sri P.N. Panikkar the leading figure of people's library movement in Kerala and the most noted activist over half a century recalls the starting of one such library named Sanathana Dharma Vayanasala,¹⁵ *only a few important wealthy persons could subscribe to newspapers in villages. Due to my thirst to know about the social and political movements that were blowing around I somehow managed to subscribe a newspaper at my house. It was 'Sreevazhumkodu National Daily'. Five to eight persons assembled everyday at my house and they asked me to read the paper aloud. I felt happy about it. I also used to read to them biographies of great men in days when we missed the paper. Sri P.N. Madhavan Pillai a friend of mine subscribed two other dailies and he had a small collection of books. Pooling together these books and newspapers in a small room freely rented out for the purpose; we started the small library. In this manner many houses in villages of Kerala became focal points of reading and discussion and thus sowed the seeds of the people's library movement. When the strength of the people who assembled to listen grew larger they shifted the venue from the houses to small buildings or rooms elsewhere. They established small document collections from the books donated to them by people living around. Educated youngsters from villages offered their leisure time to manage these collections. Gradually they became small institutions organised on democratic principles. Cultural activities of the villages revolved around these libraries and eventually became centres of social reforms.*

7. Nationalist Writings

Writings of Mahatma Gandhi and other leaders of the national movement exercised tremendous influence on the people. Translations of these works by social and political leaders of Kerala offered people of Kerala ample opportunity to be inspired by those writings.

In Kerala during the days of national movement, the activists of the Congress Socialist Party which developed within the Congress took active interest in cultural renaissance of Kerala. They realised

that political and literary works, dramas and discussions were the best media used throughout the world to educate the public to rouse their political and social consciousness and to kindle the fire of revolutions.¹⁶ The result was a progressive literary movement. A flood of novels, dramas and poems dealing with social, political and economic issues appeared. They were produced with an intention to creating among peasants, workers, and lower middle class an awareness of one's due rights and to fight for their rights.

Majority of people, however, remained outside the reach of these media due to illiteracy, poverty and lack of communication systems. So these political and social reformers preferred venues closest to the people from where almost a dialogue with the common people could be possible. Such venues selected ultimately were the public libraries.

The first attempt by the people to establish such an institution was during the reign of Visakam Tirunal Maharaja. With his support a library named Suguna Poshini was established in 1880 at Vanchiyoor (Trivandrum) and a vast collection of Malayalam books was assembled there.¹⁷ The SRMV Association Library at Karamana started functioning in 1888. Jnanapradayini Library of Neyyattinkara, Sankara Vilasam Library of Chengannoor and Chithira Tirunal Smaraka Granthasala of Trivandrum came into existence before 1920 due to people's initiative and effort.¹⁸ All these libraries organised literary and cultural activities and discussions on topics of current interest. The contributions of Chithira Tirunal Smaraka Granthasala of Vanchiyoor to Kerala's cultural and literacy schemes was enormous. For almost six decades it functioned in close association with the most notable cultural and literary figures of Kerala. Popularisation of standard literature and arts carried out by this institution was remarkable.

8. Focal Point for Reform Movement

The political and social activists found in the public libraries their natural base, a focal point from where they could spread their reform movements and activities. With this motive they infiltrated into the existing people's libraries. They used the existing libraries and also established thousands of new ones in the places where they were not already existing. The Congress and Communist Party workers organised study circles, evening classes, adult education programmes etc. in these venues. The novels, poems and essays of the Progressive Literary Movement were usually circulated through these libraries. Dramas produced with the

intention of attracting and retaining more workers for the national movement and for forming public opinion were staged in connection with cultural programmes organized by these libraries. Enormous quantity of reading materials discussing the political and social problems, published by the political parties, communal organizations, trade unions, youth associations, women's organizations etc. flowed into these village libraries. The increased use of the libraries and reading rooms raised them to the level of the most important educational and cultural centre of the localities in which they situated. This tendency was more noticeable in the rural areas and therefore apparently the villages were the beneficiaries. In fact these libraries and reading rooms attained almost the position occupied by temples in medieval Kerala. They were similar to the scholar homes and salais in few aspects. The atmosphere of these public libraries was more inviting and free than the scholar homes and salais but, naturally, lacked the depth of knowledge activity.

9. Granthasala Sangham

The beginning of the Twentieth Century saw libraries sprouting up throughout the length and breadth of Kerala like mushrooms. While hundreds of libraries took birth every year, hundreds withered away. The difficulties experienced in running them and the break down and collapse of several of them forced the attention of library workers to the need of a well organized library movement to support them. The result was the library conferences held by the people at Neyyattinkara in 1925, Trivandrum in 1933, Neyyoor in 1937 and Calicut in 1937. In 1931 the first association of libraries in Kerala; 'Samastha Kerala Pustakalaya Samithi' was formed.²⁰ It was a short lived one. In 1941 'Kerala Granthasala Sangham' was formed.²¹ It did tremendous work in establishing and maintaining libraries in Malabar area upto 1953. In 1947 'All Travancore Granthasala Sangham' was formed with membership of 47 libraries.²² It assumed the title 'Kerala Granthasala Sangham' when Kerala State was formed. At the time of enactment of library legislation in Kerala in 1989 the Sangham's membership was about 5,000 libraries most of which were established by its own initiative. Even though the Sangham projected the concept of people's library and information system as a mere system for cultural activities and for training people in democratic form of government its contributions to Kerala's politics and culture, and to the creating of library awareness among the people are immense.

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